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Area Agency on Aging recognized with award at national conference

SAN DIEGO, Calif. — Area Agency on Aging (AAA) was recognized this week with a national award at the USAgging 51st Annual Conference and Tradeshow in San Diego, California.

AAA received the 2026 Aging Innovations Award from USAgging in the Health-Social Care Integration category.

The award was presented in recognition of **Bridge to Independence**, an innovative model that redesigned how services are coordinated across programs and partners to help older adults transition safely from hospital to home.

"Bridge to Independence strengthens the connection between health care providers and community-based services, helping older adults navigate a safe transition from hospital to home," said Christine Vanlandingham, CEO of Region IV Area Agency on Aging. "By coordinating timely follow-up, addressing non-medical needs, and connecting individuals with the right services and supports, we can help reduce avoidable hospital readmissions while promoting independence and quality of life."

Through Bridge to Independence, Region IV Area Agency on Aging helps older adults transition safely from hospital to home by coordinating services, identifying barriers to improved health and independence, and connecting individuals with community-based supports. Behind the scenes, staff from multiple programs were cross-trained and new workflows were redesigned to create a more seamless, person-centered experience. The approach makes it easier for older adults and caregivers to access the services they need while strengthening coordination among health care, aging services, and community partners.

Since launching the Bridge to Independence model in 2023, Area Agency on Aging achieved a 66% increase in the number of individuals for whom staff arranged or coordinated services, demonstrating expanded capacity to meet community needs. Within the program's Rapid Response hospital-transition

process, 97% of participants avoided a readmission for the same diagnosis within 30 days, reflecting the value of timely outreach and coordinated supports.

"This award reflects the creativity, dedication, and hard work of our staff, who reimagined how services are coordinated for older adults in our region," Vanlandingham said. "By bringing programs together, strengthening partnerships, and focusing on the whole person, we have created a model that helps people access support more quickly and remain independent in their communities."

Vanlandingham, AAA Chief Operations Officer Theresa Uhrich, Coordinated Care and Wellness Director Lynn Berlin, and several other AAA staff members were present at the USAging Conference to accept the award.

"These award-winning programs reflect the ingenuity, dedication and local leadership of Area Agencies on Aging across the country," said Sandy Markwood, CEO of USAging. "They show what is possible when communities invest in the innovative approaches that Area Agencies on Aging develop to respond to the real needs of older adults and caregivers, and we are proud to celebrate the organizations leading this important work."

USAging is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging.

USAging presented 16 Aging Innovations Awards and 33 Aging Achievement Awards to programs in a variety of areas, including agency operations, caregiving, community planning and livable communities, elder abuse prevention, health-social care integration, healthy aging, home and community-based services, housing and homelessness, nutrition, social engagement, technology, transportation and mobility, and workforce development and volunteerism.

You can read about all award winners and learn more about USAging at usaging.org/aia.

For more information about Region IV Area Agency on Aging's programs and initiatives, visit Region IV Area Agency on Aging or call 800-654-2810.

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Region IV Area Agency on Aging has been serving Southwest Michigan with aging and disability services for over 50 years. RIV AAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation. Established in 1974 for the business of developing age supportive commerce and services, it plays a major role in planning, funding, and delivery of a host of services. Empowerment and independence of community members are driving themes behind its efforts. Designated by the State of Michigan to receive federal Older Americans Act funds for planning and development, the agency manages an array of government contracts for service delivery in Southwest Michigan. Its primary service area includes Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. For more information about the RIVAAA, visit www.areaagencyonaging.org.